

Economic Development, Unearned Income and Mortality: Evidence from Tribal Casinos?

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Key Findings and Policy Implications

This paper investigates the impact of economic expansions and unearned income transfers arising from tribal casino operations on the mortality of Native American and other residents of American Indian reservations. It uses 1999-2018 data on demographics, health utilization and mortality from the Medicare Carrier file, including the records of all Native Americans and a random sample of one-in-five people from other races who resided on or near a tribal reservation. The data were merged with zip code level data on casino openings and per capita cash transfer arrangements. The study finds that:

- Individuals who identified as Native American and resided on or near a tribal reservation in 1999 (the beginning of the study period) had an almost 2-month lower life expectancy relative to non-Native Americans over all years in the data.
- The mortality rate for Native American men was reduced by 7.4 percent among those living near tribal lands that had a casino opening, compared with those that did not. Native American men on reservations with casino operations experienced about a 3-week increase in life expectancy, compared to their non-American Indian counterparts.
- Among tribes that signed an agreement allocating a proportion of tribal casino revenues as cash transfers to tribally enrolled citizens, mortality was lower regardless of race or gender. This suggests improvements in longevity not just for tribal members who received the cash transfers, but potential spillover effects to area residents who are not tribally enrolled members.
- The largest impact of the cash transfers was on Native American women, whose mortality reduction was about 9 percent, or 5 extra weeks of life expectancy.

American Indian and Alaska Natives have experienced some of the most dire health and mortality outcomes of any race or ethnic group in the United States. This study quantifies the positive effects on longevity of opening a casino on tribal lands and disbursing unearned income to tribal members.

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